



**Celebrating Australian
nurses who are championing
planetary health and
sustainable practice:**

**A compilation
of case studies**

2023

Authors

In this project, we sought to compile a series of case studies profiling nurses who are leading initiatives designed to champion planetary health and sustainable practice. It was undertaken in 2023 by members of the Planetary Health in Nursing & Midwifery Research & Education Collaborative. The project was led by Distinguished Professor Tracy Levett-Jones from the University of Technology Sydney. Project team members included James Bonnamy (Monash University), Loraine Fields (University of Wollongong), Jack Cornish and Elaine Correia Moll (University of Technology Sydney), Professor Tracey Moroney OAM (Curtin University), Catelyn Richards (University of Tasmania); Dr Naomi Tutticci (Griffith University) and Dr Aletha Ward (University of Southern Queensland).

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Background

As human driven industrial activity and animal agriculture has amplified, greenhouse gas emission levels and global temperatures have significantly increased¹. This has caused catastrophic environmental disruption and become a critical threat to human health².

The World Health Organization has described climate change as the greatest threat to public health in the 21st Century. Australians are already feeling the effects of a warming planet with more frequent and intense heatwaves, unprecedented droughts, fires and floods. Illness, injury and death related to environmental disasters and extreme heat represent just a few of the impacts of climate change on people's health and well-being

- NATIONAL HEALTH AND CLIMATE STRATEGY

Despite being at the forefront of responding to the impacts of climate change, healthcare is also contributing significantly to carbon emissions³. In response, many Australian organisations have developed sustainability and emissions reduction strategies with a number aiming to be Net Zero over the next 15–20 years. While it is encouraging to see healthcare leaders with bold strategies aimed at mitigating and addressing the impacts of climate change on health, more nursing leaders and role models are needed to champion sustainability initiatives.

Nurses can make a powerful contribution to both mitigate climate change and to support people and communities to adapt to its impacts. Leadership from nurses to take immediate action to build climate resilient healthcare systems is necessary

- INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF NURSES

Nurses are well positioned to drive sustainability agendas as they comprise the largest healthcare disciplinary group and are a highly trusted profession⁴. Indeed, the links between the environment and nursing practice have been established for centuries⁵. Yet, the nursing response to climate change has typically been slow with few nurses considering themselves to be change agents for planetary health⁶. This is partly due to historic conceptualisations of the profession that have centred the nursing response on 'downstream' measures⁷, instead of systemic upstream approaches. However, nurses' holistic approach to health along with their understanding of how climate change disproportionately affects those who are most vulnerable, gives them a unique perspective and allows them to identify creative solutions and advocate for policies that address climate justice issues.

While some nurses are pioneering local changes and implementing planetary health innovations well ahead of the curb, only a select few are sharing their trailblazing work. This lack of visible nursing role models is problematic, especially for future nurses, as '*you cannot be what you cannot see*'⁸.

This report showcases nurses who are leading successful initiatives designed to have a positive impact on healthcare sustainability, climate change and planetary health. We interviewed nurses from four Australian States who are working in clinical, organisational and educational roles. The inspirational models of innovation they describe will help healthcare and educational organisations to re-imagine the role of all nurses in championing healthcare sustainability initiatives.

Claire Lane

Founder and Director of 'Save Our Supplies'



Claire Lane has been championing sustainable nursing practice since 2012 and is the founder and director of Save Our Supplies, a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to repurpose medical supplies to assist vulnerable communities and simultaneously minimise waste.

Claire's concern for more sustainable healthcare began when she was working as a registered nurse in operating theatres and observed the large volumes of clean, useable medical supplies being continually discarded. Upon questioning this practice, Claire was met with responses such as *'that's the way it's always been done'*. Not happy with that response, Claire took it upon herself to investigate opportunities for repurposing supplies and reducing waste. However, she found that nobody was actively involved in this space. Eventually Claire was able to connect with a branch of Rotary that focused on the supply of educational resources to schools in vulnerable communities. From this, Claire concluded that *'where there is an under resourced school, there must be an under resourced hospital'* and Save Our Supplies was established.

Founded in 2012, Save our Supplies collects clean, useable medical supplies from a variety of public and private hospitals across Queensland. The supplies, which otherwise would be considered 'waste', are then sorted and redistributed by Claire and her team of volunteers to areas of need such as low-income countries. Save our Supplies has delivered approximately five million dollars of free medical supplies to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands,

Cambodia and Fiji, as well as services for homeless people and disaster impacted areas. Under Claire's leadership, Save Our Supplies has had a significant impact, benefitting people and the planet, contributing to the circular economy and reducing landfill. In 2022 alone, Save Our Supplies diverted approximately 20 tonnes of useable medical supplies from landfill, benefitting an estimated 700,000 people.

In recognition of her contribution to sustainable healthcare, Claire was awarded the Queensland Health Minister's Award for Nursing Trailblazers in 2022. Claire has also been awarded a 2024 Westpac Social Change Fellowship.

Claire is an advocate for creating sustainable change and recommends to others who aspire to make a social and environmental impact that perseverance is key ... *'if you believe in something, keep at it'*. Claire acknowledges that there will be challenges along the way and people telling you *'no'* but *'just keep going'*. Most importantly, Claire strongly believes actions can have a ripple effect and that *'one person really can make a difference'*.

Justine Parsons

Clinical Nurse Consultant
and Sustainability Champion



Justine Parsons is a Clinical Nurse Consultant (CNC) in the 44 bed Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at John Hunter Hospital, Newcastle, NSW. Her journey as a sustainability champion began in 2020, after responding to a call for expressions of interest.

Justine convened a small climate action group comprised of like-minded colleagues, and the decision was made to embark on the sustainability journey by first targeting the 1200 single use plastic baby bottles being disposed of and contributing to landfill each week. Working with the sustainability officer, a recycling company was identified that was able to re-purpose the hospital grade plastic into products such as landscaping materials and outdoor furniture. These products had the potential to be purchased by the hospital, contributing to a circular economy. While, on face value, this seemed like a 'quick win', it required considerable staff education and ongoing negotiation with the housekeeping/cleaning and waste management teams. However, to date, over 200,000 bottles have been recycled as well as 2500 feeding syringes.

The next project tackled by Justine and her team was the 1400+ nappies being disposed of each week in NICU. After exploring various options that claimed to be sustainable, and then trialling six different types, bamboo nappies were selected for implementation. Once again, this process was not without its challenges. Education on the rationale for segregation of nappies from other commingled waste streams was needed, along with obtaining the buy-in of cleaning staff. Perhaps most challenging was negotiations with the vendor, as the bamboo nappies needed to be cost

neutral, and with procurement, as these nappies are not on the New South Wales Health State contract. Adding to the complexity was that the nappies needed to be disposed of in biodegradable plastic bags which were more expensive than other plastic bags and also not on the State contract. Cost to the healthcare budget had to be weighed up against cost to the environment.

Despite the complexities and challenges, Justine remains committed to planetary health and promoting sustainable healthcare. This imperative is particularly relevant to Neonatal Intensive Care as the imminent threat of climate events such as heatwaves and bushfires has proven to increase the risk of pre-term births.

Justine's commitment to this work was recognised in 2023 when she was a recipient of a Hunter New England Area Health Service awards in the sustainability category.

Justine's advice to other 'would be' sustainability champions is three-fold: *'ensure you have a team to work with; be prepared to do a lot of reading, research and self-education (for example on the carbon footprint of various products); and be patient, as practice change takes considerable time and determination'*.

Lorraine Fields

Nursing academic and Associate Head of Teaching and Learning



Lorraine Fields is the Associate Head of Teaching and Learning at the University of Wollongong (UOW), New South Wales. Sustainability has always been a priority for Lorraine and, connecting strongly with the adage *'you can't be what you can't see'*, she actively seeks to role model a sustainable lifestyle for her friends, family, colleagues and students. The devastation secondary to the increasing number of recent environmental disasters in her own region resulted in *'many students being affected by the fires and the floods ... and some people losing their houses'*. This further reinforced Lorraine's commitment to prioritise learning related to sustainability and planetary health.

In 2021, Lorraine was tasked with the responsibility for the revision and redevelopment of the Bachelor of Nursing program at UOW along with integrating the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into nursing curricula. Importantly, this included the revision of the program's capstone subject which consolidates and showcases knowledge, and tackles real-world problems. Lorraine decided to focus on the SDGs in this subject as a means of embedding sustainability and planetary health into the program. UOW's strategic plan aligns with the SDGs, further supporting her decision to focus on sustainability within nursing.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. It includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

Lorraine's main challenge in the teaching related to the SDGs was to avoid solely *'delivering bad news'* related to the health of the planet and appearing fatalistic. She addressed this in the capstone project by adopting the *'think global, act local'* approach, which saw students develop sustainability initiatives that could be implemented into their future practice and personal lives. Moving forward, Lorraine's plan is to integrate sustainability across the entire nursing curriculum as she notes that while *'the SDGs may be time limited, sustainability will never expire'*.

Lorraine has introduced sustainability to the teaching of more than 1000 students to date. Her commitment to the *'war on waste'*, has resonated with students with one noting that *'even one person can do something that achieves the SDGs ... one small change could develop into a major change if everyone starts doing it!'*

Lorraine's advice for educators is to avoid concept tokenism and to actively embed planetary health and sustainability concepts consistently to develop a nursing ethos of working with people and the planet. She advocates that educators should role model sustainable behaviour, and to *'start slow, give people something to do... and explain why you're doing what you're doing'*.

Steven Wells

Registered Nurse and horticultural therapist



Steven Wells loves to *'dream big and start small'* within his unique role as a registered nurse, horticulturalist, and horticultural therapist at the Austin Health Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre, Melbourne, Victoria. Steven's clinical role in the 12-bed Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Unit and his therapy work within this rehabilitation space allow him to channel his passion for human wellbeing and green spaces, thus contributing to a planetary health agenda.

In 2003, Steven's passion for nursing and horticulture ignited the interest of the Nurse Unit Manager (NUM) who saw the potential for horticultural therapy within the ABI unit. Steven reflected that this moment was akin to *'seed being scattered on fertile soil, rather than rocky ground'*. With no funding available the NUM supported a 2-hour horticultural therapy session once a week, timed for when there was 'double staff' on the shift. Four years on from that first step in connecting patients with nature, and after receiving funding from grants, bequests, and donations, the ABI unit began to support a full-day horticultural rehabilitation program. Steven uses horticultural therapy with activities like potting and propagation. This supports people with their rehabilitation goals, return to wellness, functional ability and confidence to transition home. Patients shift from feeling disempowered and defined by their illness, and their sense of identity returns.

With no ongoing operational and financial support for horticultural and wellness projects, Steven was emboldened to consider the *'what if'*, as he now knew what was possible. In 2010, Austin Health seconded Steven to write a garden master plan as part of the organisation's environmental management strategy. Using a patient-focused lens Steven ensured that the plan addressed patient wellbeing from an environmental and planetary health perspective. This nuanced approach to increasing the 'greening' of the hospital environment and practices, resulted in a three-day-a-week role to champion the increased use of green spaces for the benefit of patients, staff and visitors. With this approach to *'working from within'* and using sustainable principles, the green spaces within Austin Health's facilities are now used for individual, quiet, contemplative time, allied health-led therapy sessions, and space for gatherings of staff, patients and families. Green space became particularly

important during the COVID-19 pandemic with staff and patients experiencing feelings of isolation, uncertainty and stress. Five minutes spent meandering in the garden allowed them to refocus *'away from the ward and its business'*. Steven observed how staff were able to converse while potting a succulent in their brief breaks. They were able to switch off and chat about stress management and the benefits of connecting with outdoor spaces. Steven still has staff members coming up to him and giving him status updates on their succulents.

Steven was the 2012 winner of the Gardening Australia magazine's Gardener of the Year award, which helped spotlight his vision for the value of horticultural therapy and therapeutic gardens in healthcare settings.

Steven's horticultural knowledge and experience has been essential for designing and maintaining sustainable green spaces. Plant selection is also crucial for the successful maintenance and visual impact of the gardens, especially when no irrigation is used, and the gardens rely completely on rainfall. Steven intentionally positioned the ABI unit garden at the entry to the facility, as the lush, green, and flourishing garden has a positive impact on patients' and staff perception of the unit, both as a temporary home and workplace.

Steven believes that human and planetary health are intertwined, and his work in connecting people with green spaces is an important piece in addressing climate change and improving human health.

Steven's recommendations for success in greening and wellbeing in healthcare include:

- » Have a passion
- » Work from within
- » Focus on capabilities
- » Look for low-hanging fruit
- » Seek sustainable solutions
- » Work out what/who you can influence

Clare Wensor

Clinical Nurse Specialist and co-lead of an Intensive Care Unit Sustainability Portfolio



Clare Wensor is a Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) in the 29 bed Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at the Austin Hospital, Heidelberg, Victoria, where she co-leads the sustainability portfolio with CNS Penny Ashworth. Part of this portfolio includes her involvement in EPIC (Engagement in Plastic free Innovation for Change), a project aimed at reducing the hundreds of thousands of tonnes of single use plastic waste generated by hospitals each year.

The COVID-19 pandemic raised significant concerns about environmental sustainability due to the exponential increase in ICU waste, with audits revealing how much plastic waste, including personal protective equipment, the ICU was sending to landfill (see image above). This inspired the Clare and her colleagues to consider effective waste reduction strategies. In addition to a recycling program which focused on gloves and coffee cups, the team were keen to identify an initiative that could have significant impact and their attention turned to calf compressor sleeves. Each knee-length calf compressor sleeve weights 230 grams and the team identified that an estimated 221.4 kilograms, or 962 sleeves, were being sent to landfill every year.

In July 2023, Clare led a trial designed to collect and recycle used but unsoiled calf compressor sleeves. Collection bags were placed in two separate ICU pan rooms providing accessibility and convenience for staff to deposit the calf compressors. Clear signage with unambiguous visuals were important to help staff accurately identify appropriate waste disposal receptacles. Importantly, strategic positioning of general waste bins nearby recycling streams helped to reduce contamination rates, which may otherwise have jeopardised the success of the recycling initiative.

Because calf compressor sleeves have traditionally been disposed of in general waste after a patient is discharged from the ICU, there were some entrenched practices to overcome in order to ensure the success of this trial. However, since the trial began, more than 200 calf compressor sleeves have been collected by the Austin's waste services team and remanufactured by Medsalv®, a Therapeutic Goods Administration approved company, ready for resale. In just a few months, over 50 kilograms of waste was diverted from landfill. The trial was so successful that it continues alongside other sustainability initiatives including the recycling of medication vial caps and toiletries such as toothpaste tubes and toothbrushes. Given the success of the trial in ICU, the sustainability team at the Austin are hoping to roll out the initiative to other units.

Clare's advice with sustainability changes is to 'make it easy' so that busy clinicians and support staff want to be involved, and to 'celebrate small wins', for example, by creatively demonstrating the amount of waste that has been diverted from landfill due to the collaborative efforts of the team.

Roslyn Morgan

Environmental Health Officer



Roslyn (Ros) Morgan is a Registered Nurse who began implementing sustainability initiatives in 2007 in the Intensive Care Unit where she worked. She stated that, *“It’s as simple as ... we recycle at home, we should recycle at work.”* At that time, environmental awareness in healthcare was in its infancy, but it did not take long for nurses and midwives to understand the connection between working in healthcare and sustainability.

Soon after Ros began running sustainability themed projects in the ICU, other wards made contact, seeking information and support. After joining a Green Champions group, Ros began coordinating cross-campus projects, including fun activities, such as Kimguard fashion!. This led to her being offered a Sustainability Officer secondment, then commencing as the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) (Vic Branch) Environmental Health Officer.

In this role, Ros brought ambition to resource busy clinicians with tools and education. She was also determined to tackle the lack of pharmaceutical waste bin provisioning. At that time, medications were often being incorrectly disposed of in sharps containers or down the drain. This endangers the environment, impacts marine environments and drinking water, and adds to human and planetary health threats. It is also in breach of the Victorian Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) Operational Guidance. The ANMF (Vic Branch) management were supportive and, after much ground work, Ros worked with both the Department of Health and a VicTAG group to develop specific tools and posters to assist with implementation and advocacy for appropriate pharmaceutical waste bins. Ros said *“It was so important to have a nurses voice in this space to ensure our practical user perspective was front and center.”*

Water quality experts and environmental advocates are increasingly concerned about chemicals from prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications getting into lakes, rivers, and streams

- HARVARD HEALTH

Education and issue promotion contributed to awareness and nurses and midwives began to increasingly question

local practice. ANMF (Vic Branch) delegates also expressed their concerns about incorrect disposal of medications and the difficulty of accessing adequate numbers of appropriate bins. A public webinar brought stakeholders together, with the aim of securing a commitment to address the issue. The Victorian EPA were specifically requested to use their regulatory authority and in 2023 the EPA wrote to health services reminding them of their obligations, and have since commenced auditing of facilities. Ros said *“It is rewarding to see this grass roots frustration progress to a State-wide campaign with the bins increasingly in use”.*

One challenge facing the safe disposal of pharmaceutical waste project was misinformation. Many nurses and midwives incorrectly believe that medication disposed of in sharps bins in Victoria is incinerated or that certain pharmaceutical bins biologically inactivate medications. There can also be barriers to obtaining pharmaceutical bins and, when obtained, an absence of associated education.

Ros believes in empowering people so that they can take action. Some of her recommendations include integrating environmental sustainability into undergraduate and postgraduate nursing and midwifery programs, *‘spreading the word’* that sustainable healthcare is part of their scope of practice and quality improvement, and recognising that *“the momentum in this space is radical, let’s use it.”*

ANMF (Vic branch) advocacy, education and awareness raising resources and strategies

- » Green Nurses Midwives and Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ANMFVicGreenNM>
- » How to start a green team: <https://education.anmfvic.asn.au/course/view.php?id=96>
- » Nursing for the Environment INTENSIVE (face to face education) <https://education.anmfvic.asn.au/>
- » Annual Health and Environmental Sustainability conference: <https://otr.anmfvic.asn.au/articles/five-things-we-learned-at-the-2023-health-environmental-sustainability-conference>
- » Resources/tools: <https://www.anmfvic.asn.au/healthenvironmentalsustainability> and [New recycling posters available – On the Record \(anmfvic.asn.au\)](https://www.anmfvic.asn.au/new-recycling-posters)

Jen Bardsley

Nurse Lead for Climate and Health



After graduating with a Bachelor of Nursing degree in 2007, Jen became immediately shocked by the lack of sustainable practices in healthcare. On completion of a Masters of Sustainability Studies in 2011, Jen was appointed as the inaugural Nurse Lead for Climate and Health at the 700+ bed Fiona Stanley Hospital at Fremantle, Western Australia (WA). Being active in climate and health, she also became a mentor for the AI Gore, [Climate Reality Project](#).

The Nurse Lead for Climate and Health role involves working with the South Metropolitan Health Service Sustainability Officer and disseminating strategic initiatives to nursing staff. It also includes communicating with nursing, medical, health support service and allied health staff, providing training and development opportunities, and supporting ward areas and departments across Fremantle and the Fiona Stanley Hospital Group to achieve their sustainability goals. One of the benefits of Jen's role is that she has been able to connect with clinicians across Australia to promote sustainability and prevent duplication of effort.

As the only Nurse Climate Health Lead in WA, Jen also engages with external nursing organisations such as the Chief Nursing and Midwifery Organisation and the Royal College of Nursing. With a view to ensuring that future nurses have the knowledge and skills they need to contribute to sustainability initiatives and planetary health, Jen also liaises with WA universities to promote the need to include climate health in curricula.

Jen has been involved in various sustainability initiatives and was instrumental in driving the Fiona Stanley Hospital's 'Save the Bluey'ⁱⁱ Campaign'. Although reducing expenditure was not the primary aim of the campaign, the Hospital has saved approximately \$20,000 on purchasing blueys and \$500 on waste disposal costs.

The 'Bluey Campaign' saw a 21% reduction in the use of blueys, equivalent to 1.9 tonnes or 82,150 fewer blueys going to landfill.

Operating as both a nurse and a leader, Jen's story represents the importance of supporting the traditional Sustainability Officer roles, which are often transdisciplinary, with discipline-specific leaders that address the unique imperatives and needs of each health discipline. Jen's expertise as a nurse, with embedded systems thinking, paired with the passion and knowledge of sustainability, demonstrates the value of having nurses involved at all levels of climate and health strategy.

i. Kinguard is a disposable fabric used to wrap sterile instruments. 'Kinguard fashion' is a creative team building activity and a way to increase staff awareness of healthcare sustainability (see [example](#)).

ii. Blueys are disposable bed pads with multiple layers of absorbent tissue paper and a plastic waterproof backing.

Anne Watts

Nurse Unit Manager



Recognising a significant gap in National and State environmental sustainability strategies, and their practical application in a clinical environment, Anne Watts, Nurse Unit Manager of the Spinal Ward at Fiona Stanley Hospital, has led the way in implementing sustainability initiatives in clinical care. Noting problems such as high consumption of single use products (and subsequent high levels of plastic waste), as well as excess use of resources such as energy, water and pharmaceuticals, Anne identified an opportunity for innovation within the ward.

As an organisational nursing leader, Anne recognised that long-lasting and tangible change must be driven by those who best understand the landscape in which the change is being implemented.

Anne began by establishing a sustainability committee who committed to a flexible, action-focused, and incremental approach to influencing a sustainability mindset both across the ward, and the organisation. The staff identified numerous areas of action that could occur, however there needed to be a way to both track and share sustainability initiatives, concepts and ideas.

The amount of information and ideas generated within the ward became so extensive, that the team developed a 'Sustainability tree' to provide a constant visual reminder of the progress made, and to facilitate a place for new

ideas to be recorded. The colour of each leaf on the tree indicates the project's progress, with red representing an idea that has not been actioned, orange a project which is currently in progress, and green is for a finished project. The sustainability tree has been a useful visual reminder to track, communicate and disseminate the ward's sustainability initiatives.

Anne noticed that maintaining staff momentum and optimism with sustainability projects required consistent attention. She worked to ensure that the team had their own agency and capacity to collectively make a significant impact at the local level. Anne found that acquiring and analysing meaningful data was difficult, however it was vital for measuring the impact of the team's initiatives. An additional challenge was communicating project progress to staff in a time sensitive manner so they could be informed of the impact of changes – further perpetuating momentum for progression. Anne is an example of how a highly experienced nurse leader can influence change and promote sustainable healthcare by empowering and working alongside her team.

Executive Summary

This report has provided a snapshot of the experiences and perspectives of a group of Australian nurses who are engaged in and highly committed to planetary health and sustainable healthcare. Accomplishing extraordinary things can be challenging, but the nurses showcased in this report illustrate that determination along with creative strategies, can help to address the climate crisis. Our hope, is that by providing insights into the successes and challenges experienced by these nurses in their various roles, healthcare and educational organisations will be better able to re-imagine the role of nurses and their actual and potential influence in championing evidence-based sustainability initiatives.

We advocate that these case studies demonstrate that appointment of more nurses with climate and sustainability expertise at all levels of healthcare, including those in clinical, educational, research, leadership and strategy roles, will accelerate the implementation of responsive strategies that target waste management, emissions

reduction and climate resilience across healthcare organisations. Further, educating and empowering current and future nurses to design, research and implement sustainability and planetary health initiatives will build the capacity of the workforce to respond to the impacts of climate change and mitigate further impacts, ultimately improving the health of individuals and communities.

The health of each of us is intricately and inextricably connected to the health of our planet

- STOHL⁹



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